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ABSTRACT

In this study, students' perception of group membership (high-ability group, middle-ability group, and low-ability group) was found to affect their performance on a test of reading achievement. Subjects were 157 seniors in a developmental reading course. Data revealed that those students who believed that they had been placed in a high ability group scored better on the achievement test, thought that their first-grade ranking with regard to reading ability was higher, and adjusted their expectations of the effects of new instructional techniques to reflect a positive attitude. Conversely, students who thought that they were in the low group had poorer reading test scores, remembered their first-grade ranking as lower, and expected to do less well in future reading work. Even with extra instruction, the group with low perceptions of ability scored lower than the other two groups. (KS)

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The Effects of Ability Grouping upon the Self-Confidence and Achievement of Students Who Are Learning to Read

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This study was conducted in a simulated teaching situation with pre-service elementary school teachers to help them to experience the effects of ability grouping upon the beginning reader.

Because the effect of the experience would be spoiled if the participants knew the nature of the study, this study had to be conducted over a number of years with seven different groups of students. Complete data were obtained for 157 subjects.

With each of the seven classes the following procedure was used. Seniors in a developmental reading course were told they would be taught to read using a new alphabet. Approximately 15% of the class members were randomly selected and secretly given 15 minutes of introductory instruction using the new alphabet. (These students were to represent the educationally-advantaged children who enter the beginning reading program with some knowledge of the alphabet and the written word).

At the beginning of the first session with the whole class, all students were asked to complete a questionnaire in which they were asked in which third of the class they expected to rank at the end of the experiment and in which third of their first-grade class they thought they had ranked as they learned to read. In addition, they were asked to rate the difficulty of learning to read on a five-point scale.

A paper presented April 7, 1977 at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New York.

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Generally the experiment was conducted in five class periods. However, due to class scheduling differences, the five periods were arranged in either a three-day or a five-day pattern. Although the procedure used varied slightly from class to class depending upon the number of days available for this project, the following procedure was the most common.

On the first day with the entire class, the questionnaire was completed and preliminary reading instruction was begun. This instruction typically included some visual discrimination activities, the labelling of a few objects in the room, and the dictation of a class language experience story. The new artificial alphabet was used in all activities.

On the second day, while most of the class continued with activities similar to the first-day activities, approximately one-third of the class was called to a reading circle and given small books which represented preprimers. (The term "preprimer" was never used during instruction). This group was randomly chosen using their class membership numbers from the class roster. No effort was made to assign students to the group according to their ability.

The third day began with the identification of a second group who were given small books to read. The third group continued working with worksheets, board work, etc. No labels were attached to any groups, but materials for them differed.

In classes where this project was limited to three days, all groups were formed on the second day. Again no labels were attached to groups and care was taken to avoid using any terms that would designate any group as "the top group" or "the bottom group," etc. Care was also taken not to label the books in any way.

For the fourth and fifth days of five-day projects or the third day of three-day projects, the third group moved into "preprimers." In the last five classes, this group was also asked to attend special instructional sessions held before and after class.

At the end of the last instructional session, students were told that during the following week the experiment would be repeated using yet another alphabet. The questionnaire was once again administered and they were asked (1) in which third of the class they expected to rank in the new experiment, (2) in which third of their 1st-grade reading class they had been and (3) to describe on the five-point scale the difficulty of the reading process.

In the last five classes, a short achievement test was given (Form 1 to class 3 and Form 2 to classes 4-7). Approximately 80% of this objective test covered words to which all students had been exposed; the remaining items covered words for which no group had had direct instruction. However, these latter words contained graphemic bases familiar to all groups.

After the questionnaire and achievement test had been administered, a debriefing was held.

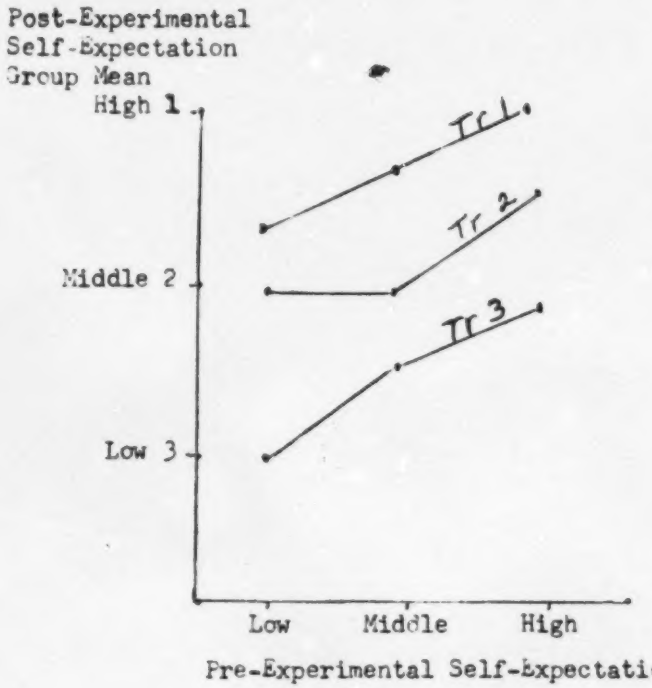
Analysis of Data

A 3x3 analysis of variance was performed on three dependent variables. The variables were: self expectation in reading, perceived difficulty of reading, and reading test score. Independent variables were: Treatment level (High, Middle, Low) and self-expectation of student (High, Middle, and Low).

Pertinent F ratios were obtained for the following null hypotheses:

1. No interaction
2. No difference in treatment means for students expecting to be High.
3. No difference in treatment means for students expecting to be Middle.
4. No difference in treatment means for students expecting to be Low.

A. Dependent variable = self-expectation score in reading
(1 = High, 2 = Middle, 3 = Low)



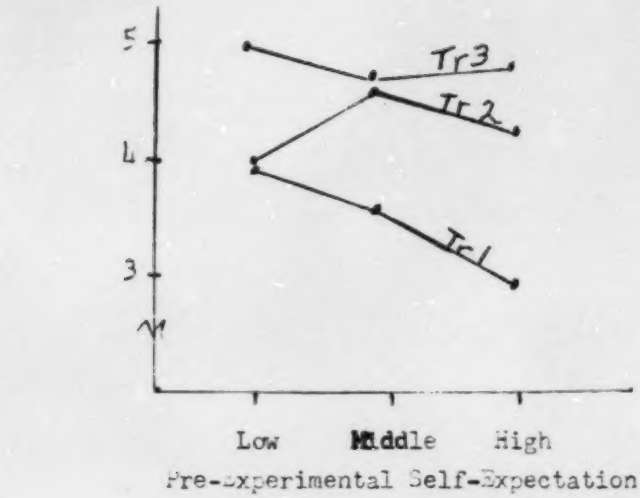
Means(Sample size)

Treatment Assignment	Low	Middle	High
High	$1.7_{(9)}$	$1.4_{(22)}$	$1.0_{(21)}$
Middle	$2.0_{(10)}$	$2.0_{(20)}$	$1.5_{(22)}$
Low	$3.0_{(7)}$	$2.5_{(22)}$	$2.1_{(21)}$

$\hat{\sigma}^2_{error} = .260$

Null Hypothesis	Obtained Ratio	Comment
1. No interaction	0.75	Not significant
2. Equal means for High	28.2	
$\mu_1 = \mu_2$	13.1	
$\mu_2 = \mu_3$	14.8	
3. Equal means for Middle	27.5	
$\mu_1 = \mu_2$	16.6	
$\mu_2 = \mu_3$	10.1	
4. Equal means for Low	14.4	
$\mu_1 = \mu_2$	2.0	Not significant
$\mu_2 = \mu_3$	15.3	

3. Dependent variable = perceived difficulty of reading
(5 = very difficult, 1 = easy)



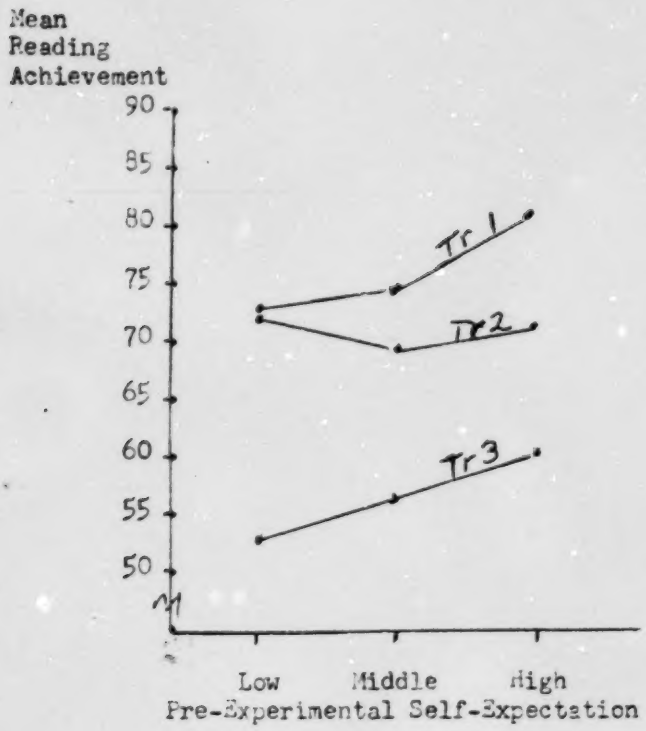
Means (Sample size)

Treatment Assignment	Low	Middle	High
High	3.9 (9)	3.6 (22)	3.9 (24)
Middle	4.0 (10)	4.6 (20)	4.3 (22)
Low	4.9 (7)	4.7 (22)	4.8 (21)

$\hat{\sigma}^2_{error} = .211$

Null Hypothesis	Obtained Ratio	Comment
1. No interaction	5.45	
2. Equal means for High	57.3	
$\mu_1 = \mu_2$	55.4	
$\mu_2 = \mu_3$	8.7	
3. Equal means for Middle	20.5	
$\mu_1 = \mu_2$	27.2	
$\mu_2 = \mu_3$	0.2	Not significant
4. Equal means for Low	6.0	
$\mu_1 = \mu_2$	0.2	Not significant
$\mu_2 = \mu_3$	8.5	

C. Dependent Variable = Reading Achievement



Means (Sample size)

Treatment Assignment	Low	Middle	High
High	72.8 (6)	74.9 (13)	80.9 (14)
Middle	72.0 (6)	69.9 (14)	71.8 (11)
Low	53.3 (3)	56.2 (12)	60.9 (13)

S^2_{error} = 71.9

Null Hypothesis	Obtained ratio	Comment
1. No interaction	0.57	Not significant
2. Equal means for High	18.8	
$\mu_1 = \mu_2$	7.0	
$\mu_2 = \mu_3$	10.0	
3. Equal means for Middle	16.1	
$\mu_1 = \mu_2$	2.3	Not significant
$\mu_2 = \mu_3$	16.8	
4. Equal means for Low	6.1	
$\mu_1 = \mu_2$	0.03	Not significant
$\mu_2 = \mu_3$	9.7	

Summary of Results

Students' perception of group membership (high ability group, middle ability group, low ability group) affected their post-test performance in every analysis. Those students who thought they had been placed in the high ability group scored better on the reading achievement test, thought their first-grade ranking was higher and adjusted their expectations more positively for new instruction than comparable students who thought of themselves as placed in other groups.

The unusual aspect of the data is that in every situation, this "coloring" is consistent. Students who thought they were in the low group had poorer reading test scores, remembered their first-grade ranking as lower and expected to do less well in similar future reading work than other randomly formed groups. Even with extra instruction, this group still scored lower than the other two groups.